At the Crossroad of Public History: Mediating the Holocaust on the Internet

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For memorials, museums and research institutions as well as for scholars and historians the Internet has become an indispensable tool for the dissemination of knowledge about the Holocaust. These representatives of a transnational and transcultural memorialization, however, are usually not at the forefront of an innovative, sometimes provocative usage of new information and communication technologies. They do, on the other hand, respond proactively to incentives from public historians with sometimes massive online activities and significant re-interpretations. Using examples from Wikipedia and Facebook these issues are discussed, while showing the fluid relationship between evolving social media technologies, our cultural memory and the representation as well as sometimes controversial forms of commemoration of the Holocaust on the Internet.

Keywords

holocaust, memory, Internet, Facebook, Wikipedia, public history

Introduction

In the early 1990s French cultural historian Pierre Nora spoke of a new “age of commemoration”, German historian Christoph Cornelißen labeled the development with the term “memory boom”, Harald Welzer and Claudia Lenz even spoke of a “memory-mania”¹. All of these scholars tried to describe the accelerated increase of memorial sites, which was accompanied by a profound change in the culture of remembrance. At the end of the 1990s, the Internet joined in as a new field of presentation for memorial institutions. In the beginning it was used as an additional publicizing channel, but over the intervening years it has become an indispensable tool for the mobilization of different social groups and for politics of memory. This underlines the argument raised in 2002 by Jan-Werner Müller, who anticipated that the profound changes in the field of

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information and communication technologies might well constitute a paradigmatic shift in the humanities comparable to the invention of the printing press.²

Today all relevant institutions of remembrance such as archives, museums and memorials use the Internet at a very professional level as a tool for self-presentation and as a forum for discussion aimed at international and interdisciplinary audiences. Beyond that, their websites bring up new issues and have a decisive impact on the Holocaust debate as well as on the historical discipline. At the same time this Internet presence is carefully used in the active politics of the day. However, although the Internet is opinion forming for the adolescent “next Holocaust generation”³, the respective institutions do not exploit the possibilities and potentials of the Internet aggressively. Creative – and sometimes controversial – new forms of commemoration and memory preservation often come from individuals or groups outside the realm of influential institutions. Lately most of these arise from an unforeseen and unpredictable usage of social networks. The study of the Holocaust on the Internet today is an independent debate that follows its own rules and submits to its own premises. Everyone who approaches the Holocaust submits to this seemingly neutral discourse. However, what Matías Martínez in 2004 observed in regard to the arts today also applies to the Internet:

Postulates such as authenticity, truthfulness, moral integrity and authentication by authorship determine the production, the design, the reception and the evaluation of art about the Holocaust. These postulates apply [...] across genres; [...] to popular art, to various media and different kinds of art [...]. And they apply not only to artistic representations in the strict sense.⁴

Beyond these characteristics there are other core-indicators of this discourse, such as multimediality, networking and fluidity, which have been analyzed by Marita Sturken⁵ and Jose van Dijck⁶.

This paper focuses on aspects of fluidity and rapid transformation of data about the Holocaust on the Internet. Special emphasis is placed on trends and changes that have occurred over recent years. Using examples from Wikipedia, as an established collaborative blog, and Facebook as a social networking site I will argue principally that relevant institutions are not at the forefront of an innovative, sometimes provocative usage of new information and communication technologies but that they do, on the other hand, respond proactively to incentives from an undefined public history with sometimes massive online activities and significant re-interpretations. Most online initiatives, both those of the undefined public and of the institutions, are characterized by their ephemerality. Still, they all have a visible influence on the representations of the Holocaust on the Internet, on future usage of evolving social media technologies, on our cultural memory and on the fluid mediation between these three.

As with any study about history and the Internet, scholarship about the Holocaust on the World Wide Web can be located at the crossroads between technology and history or memory, or to use a younger term, within the discipline of Digital Humanities. So far there has been little research focusing on these intertwining issues. The translation of Marek Kazmierczak’s “Auschwitz w Internecie” (Auschwitz on the Internet) into English is therefore being eagerly awaited.⁷ On the other hand, there have been innumerable publications dealing with memory and remembrance and the Holocaust, and most recent books relating to this topic at some point discuss the role of the Internet in this context.⁸ Also, a significant approximation to interdisciplinary approaches can be noted and historians tend to borrow from or collaborate with cultural, media and technology scholars. For this present study the publications of José van Dijck,⁹ Comparative Media Studies scholar in Amsterdam, Ursula Keitz, Media Studies scholar

in Constance/Germany, and Thomas Weber,¹⁰ Cultural Media Studies publicist, as well as the theoretical concepts of Alison Landsberg,¹¹ Marianne Hirsch¹² and Marita Sturken,¹³ have been indispensable. Also, without the in-depth researches of Abraham H. Foxman and Christopher Wolf¹⁴ (both from the Anti-Defamation League), as well as the reports of the “International Network against CyberHate” (IN@CH) together with Jugendschutz.net¹⁵ it would be almost impossible to untangle the manifold intricacies of online hate and anti-Semitism.

Holocaust: Big Data on the Internet

The association between history and memory of the Holocaust, and computers, has a long and rich past: The technologically enhanced recordings of oral histories of Shoah victims in the late 1970s and 1980s have contributed considerably to the paradigmatic shifts in the historical discipline of the time. Databases have facilitated quantitative approaches and enriched our understanding of the events during the Third Reich. Large online image- and video-collections have helped to put the Holocaust discourse at the forefront of the “memory boom” of the past three decades.¹⁶ Visualization tools such as the “geographies of the Holocaust”¹⁷ have formed our understanding of the connections between times and places and have become an integral part of educational efforts. Digital publications have helped to spread information faster and to disseminate knowledge across national and language borders. And networking, recently more frequently termed connectedness, has forced national, transnational, international and transcultural collaboration while re-phrasing national interpretations within accepted limits, thus furthering a globally accepted Holocaust education.

It would surpass the scope of this paper to begin discussing the highly complex connections and interrelationships between memory and history. Many scholars have engaged in shaping today's understanding of cultural, collective and social memory or mass individual memory, outlining its relationship to history. Nor is this the place to delve deeper into the complex relationship between media or mass media and the history and memory of the Holocaust. However, it is important to keep the “ubiquity of media” in mind but also the “increased media literacy, accessibility to producing media content and individualization of audiences”¹⁸ that we have been witnessing in the last two and a half decades. Users have changed from consumers to “prosumers” (from producers and consumers) and are engaged as public historians also shaping historical debates. The relevance of this change in technology and its usage was stressed by Elena Esposito, when she argued that a society's memory depends on its available communication technologies, because these determine its forms, range and interpretation.¹⁹

Nancy van House placed emphasis on the fact that “as individuals and as a culture, we are increasingly reliant on digitally represented material. The facility, with which material can be digitized, replicated and distributed through and across socio-technical networks has resulted in profound shifts in how we conceptualize memory, our personal and collective archive practices, and even our views of persistence and permanence.”²⁰ We are confronted with developments in, and the constant reinterpretation of, digitization, digitality, multimediality and visualization, together with concepts of collaboration, connectivity, crowdsourcing and searchability: All these are continually begging “to be reinterpreted”²¹. As a result, for some users the Internet and memory have become synonymous terms; for others, when paralleling the Internet with memory, the result is “nothing”.²² Nancy Van House und Elisabeth Churchill, for example, label search engines as “memory-machines” which determine

what we can find on the basis of technical, personal and collective biases about what is remembered and what is more or less likely to be retrieved and viewed [...]. Search engines are predicated on the notion that we as humans will want to find things in the vast digital morass. Search engines return results on the basis of algorithms that take into account factors that researchers and designers consider likely to return the result a searcher is looking for when he or she enters a query. They take into account what can be searched for technically, the system's best interpretation of the searcher's intent, and narrow (personal) and broad (social) scoping. All these factors are used to calculate a 'relevance' ranking, which determines the ordering of the results, some of which may end up pages down, only visible with effort.²³

Such a techno-centric belief stands in contrast to a theoretical, unreliable and imperfect human memory.²⁴

This technocentricity is especially evident when we are confronted with massive amounts of information researching the history and memory of the Holocaust on the World Wide Web. However, a Google trend-analysis shows that since 2004 the worldwide search interest for the term "holocaust" in English has waned considerably, having decreased by three-quarters since 2004. In addition a decline for the next two years has been predicted. The peaks in "hits" take place in January and April (with the Days of Remembrance of the Victims of the Holocaust), and the most searched-for terms were "holocaust" and "holocaust museum". Not surprisingly, there was a significant majority in search queries from English-speaking countries, with a surplus of twice as many queries in the USA as in Canada, Australia or the United Kingdom.²⁵

Screenshot: Google-Trends worldwide search analysis for the search term "holocaust" May 28 2015

The results are different when we limit the trend-analysis to Germany. Here, with the exception of the year 2005 and a peak in February 2009, the number of search queries remained fairly constant over the years, with clearly recognizable peaks in January (the International Holocaust Remembrance Day is on January 27). Also here the most searched-for terms were "holocaust berlin" and "holocaust". A breakdown of the searches for "holocaust berlin" shows a clear connection with the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Germany's capital.²⁶

Screenshot: Google-Trends search analysis for the search term “holocaust”, Germany, May 28, 2015

On the other hand, Google Books Ngram Viewer can also be an indicator of the popularity of search words and phrases. Ngram is an online phrase-usage graphing tool that has been adopted by Google from a prototype created at MIT. It displays a graph showing how words have occurred in a corpus of books (for example, “English fiction”) over a selected period of time.²⁷ If, again, we search for “holocaust” in English and German books we find that the use of the word in German peaked between 1998 and 2002, began to fall after that and has remained at the level of 1995 since 2006. In English the peak was between 2000 and 2002 and its usage has been falling steadily since then.²⁸

Screenshot: Ngram Viewer: Use of the word “Holocaust” in English and German books 1980–2008, May 28, 2015

From these findings we might conclude that the interest in the Holocaust is waning. However, we are still talking about massive amounts of information. Since search engines like Google have become the first address when fishing for information, it makes sense to analyze its search queries. If we put the term “holocaust” through Google’s search algorithms we are first of all confronted with striking numbers of hits, that have been increasing over the years: In September 2012 google.com listed close to 11 million webpages, 14 million blogs, 66 million images, 29 million videos and over 4 million books. Almost a year later, in July 2013, the results were even more overwhelming: 36 million webpages, 14 million blogs, 71 million images, 50 million videos and 5 million books gave evidence of a growing focus on multimedia-related sites and/or of the changing algorithms of the search engine with respect to the author’s personal search preferences.²⁹ Even *startpage* and *ixquick*, search engines that do not collect user data and therefore do not personalize the search results, provided stable results over the years, amounting to millions of hits: While the number of webpages remained unchanged at 5 million and 10 million, there was a considerable decrease in search results between 2012 and 2015 when combining “holocaust” with “images”, from over 1 million to 45.000 and when combining “holocaust” with “video”, from 140,000 to 1,300. The figures can be explained by the effort of the team behind these search engines to reduce links to duplicates.³⁰

Historians still do not have adequate tools they can customize to enable them to delve deeper into these findings, because such web-analysis technology is generally used by and aimed at international corporations (and therefore is very expensive). One of the few free web-analytics tools is “Alexa: The web information company”, which until the beginning of 2015 allowed historical researchers to evaluate web-traffic. After entering the term “holocaust” Alexa’s search analytics showed a moderate popularity of the keyword, whereas over 59 percent of users clicked on the English language Wikipedia entry. Only about 14 percent of users followed the link to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC and around 2.5 percent clicked on links to YouTube and the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin.³¹

Screenshot: Alexa search analytics for “holocaust”, March 26, 2014.

Before concluding this chapter I would like to take a detailed look at what kind of media relating to the Holocaust have been used over recent years. Again, using Google’s trend analysis tool, it is clearly recognizable that the “explosion of the visual” that has been a prominent topic of discussion among media theorists has had its impact on the online Holocaust discourse:³² Ever since the turn of the century users have primarily been searching for images and for videos of the Holocaust, the latter being the most prominent search since 2006.³³

Screenshot: Google-Trends search analysis for the search term “holocaust”, combined with “picture”, “video”, “blog” and “forum”, May 28, 2015

If, on the other hand, we break down users’ queries according to the technology they are using, we obtain a foreseeable result: While one of the first global social networking sites, Myspace, which had a strong music emphasis between 2005 and early 2008, initially was the most visited social net worldwide, it has declined steadily in users’ preferences over recent years. Since 2008 Facebook has been the leading social media platform for users searching for the term “holocaust”, with more than double Myspace’s figures at its peak in May 2010. Only YouTube, the video-sharing website created in 2005 and owned by Google since 2006, has been equally prominent: Searches for “holocaust” on YouTube began rising in January 2006 and reached a peak in May 2008. Since that year search queries have remained at a high level, with yearly climaxes between January and May and anticlimaxes in August. Photo-sharing platforms still lag far behind, only Instagram had a noticeable increase in search interest in the year 2013. Yet it is still too early to make any clear, forward-looking statements in this respect. It is noticeable, however, that the “holocaust”-related searches in Wikipedia were at the forefront until 2009, but since then have been declining slowly but steadily. Despite this, Wikipedia still remains an important source of relevant information.³⁴

Screenshot: Google-Trends search analysis for the search term “holocaust”, comparing “facebook”, “youtube”, “myspace”, “Instagram” and “Wikipedia”, May 28, 2015

The Holocaust Lemma on Wikipedia

The “Holocaust” entry – or lemma, as headwords in reference books are called – in the English-language Wikipedia is 63 pages long (260,874 bytes). At the end of March 2014 it had 393 footnotes, 59 images, several tables, and its bibliography listed 158 titles. There were over 100 links to related articles in its “see also”-section and numerous links in the main text, as well as 160 redirects from other pages to the article. Versions of the lemma exist in 118 different languages and dialects. The page was originally created by user Axel Boldt on November 15, 2001. Thus it is an article created in the early phase of this collaborative online encyclopedia, which itself went online on 15 January 2001.³⁵ Although it did not meet the “good article” criteria in 2001, “The Holocaust” entry was one of the “History good article nominees” in 2006 and 2007.³⁶ It was rated highly important, or of top importance, in various national wiki-projects and has been star-rated in several languages. The article has been revised 13,267 times, which is equivalent to about 89 edits a month or 3.4 edits a day. Most changes were made between 2005 and 2007, with almost 4,200 edits in 2006 alone. The article length grew steadily from 2004, reaching its current size in April 2010. Since then it has been altered often but has only insignificantly increased in length.³⁷

Apart from its size and accuracy, the traffic statistics (i.e. observing how often the Wikipedia article has been viewed) are an important indicator for scholars to determine how the entry is received and used by the public. Wikipedia has offered this statistical data since December 2007. Although some of the figures are missing in the “Wikipedia article traffic statistics” for “The_Holocaust” we nevertheless get a rather concise picture: There was a constant growth from an average of 228,000 monthly visits in December 2007 to an average of 290,000

monthly visits in October 2013. In March 2011 the views exceeded 400,000. This number was topped only in April 2013, with close to 447,000 views.³⁸

The figures make it abundantly clear that Wikipedia is a relevant site of information on the Holocaust. On the other hand, as a team of researchers from the Universities of Oxford, Budapest and New Brunswick, USA, found out, the Holocaust entry is one of the most controversial topics for scholars across 10 separate language editions of Wikipedia (aside from lemmas about “Israel”, “Adolf Hitler”, and “God”).³⁹ Indeed, the article is “semi-protected” in most languages; that means only established registered users are allowed to edit the entry because of the risk of vandalism. If, for example, we analyze the report on the “talk-section” of the English Wikipedia Holocaust-lemma from 13 March 2013, the discussions between editors are indeed manifold and rarely neutral.

A qualitative analysis of the top 60 discussions (those threads that have had more than 20 responses) in “TALK:The Holocaust/Archive” reflects just how heated the debates about the article are: More than half of the discussion threads (34 threads out of 60) are about disambiguation. This means the discussions evolve around the usage of certain terms. The main discussion topics are about the definition of the Holocaust (21 threads out of 60). Many issues evolve around victim groups (the most debated subcategory for changes of the lemma; 23 threads out of the 60 discuss victims and victim groups), and the singularity of the Holocaust or the comparability to other genocides (16 out of 60). The reasons for the debates around the definition of the Holocaust are varied. There is, however, a significant co-occurrence with discussions of “bias” and “denialism”. While 7 threads of the top 60 question whether the wording of the lemma contradicts Wikipedia’s policy regarding “neutral point of view” and accuses the editors of allowing biased contents, other discussions (9 threads out of 60) are more easily identifiable as racist, anti-Semitic, revisionist or denialist remarks: Editors openly try to change the text of the lemma, for example, by including a “Holocaust controversy” section or paragraphs about an alleged “Jewish striving to establish world dominion” prior to Adolf Hitler’s rise to power, and by questioning the accuracy of the number of Jewish victims. Others try to argue that Jews should not be allowed to contribute to the writing of the lemma, they delete references to scholars because they seemingly have identified them as being biased due to their Jewish background, and some openly deny the Holocaust. Most of these discussions at some point end abruptly because of trolling (as some editors call deliberate or intentional attempts to cause dissent), and several changes are deleted.⁴⁰ Some editors are blocked indefinitely from posting altogether (e.g., user Bannedtruth [sic!] for trolling and racism). Also, at times, entire sections are deleted after a casting of votes among the editors, as happened on Februar 27, 2010 for the section “The role of Mohammad Amin al-Husayni”, which had tried to give evidence that British policy in Palestine was the trigger for the Holocaust in Nazi Germany.⁴¹

The debate about the article’s neutrality was also the reason, why the lemma failed a “Good Article” nomination (GA-nomination) several times, as editor SlimVergin explained on November 20, 2007:

This “neutral point of view”-discourse remains an intensively discussed issue with each nomination of the lemma for “Good Article”. In her review on 2 February 2013 for yet another GA-nomination user Midnightblueowl again argued the NPOV:

I'm not confident that this page manages to remain neutral on this hugely controversial issue; its use of language consistently betrays a bias towards the belief that the Holocaust was a bad thing. For instance, the term 'murder' is regularly employed – I appreciate that this term is itself widely used in the literature on the Holocaust, but it is also a term that carries with it solely negative

connotations. Imagine that you were a Nazi, or a Neo-Nazi, who really believed that the Jews were an evil threat to German civilization who had to be eradicated; would you consider the deaths in the Holocaust to constitute ‘murder’ in that instance, or would you instead think of them as justified executions? Terms like ‘killings’, ‘deaths’ and ‘genocide’ could be used without the same connotations.⁴⁵

Although, of course, serious scholars would dismiss most of these arguments, the review clearly shows what influence the discussions about the entry have on the text itself and how consensus is achieved.

This means that, as long as users are arguing, there will be changes to the entry. On the other hand, this also means that, although scholars might be tempted to dismiss Wikipedia as unreliable, there is a strong argument for engaging in adding to the entry in order to influence its wording. Because, as a matter of fact, Wikipedia has become the current “Book of Knowledge” John C. Dvorak argued in July 2013: Although there is an anomaly behind the statistical numbers and although editors often have a specific agenda, users usually are not aware of these issues and make Wikipedia their only source of information, simply because it is convenient.⁴⁶ Therefore Wikipedia not only tells us a lot about society, it is also a source of insight into human behavior, as Yasseri and his colleagues have asserted: “Our results indicate that Wikipedia is more than just an encyclopedia; it is also a window into convergent and divergent social-spatial priorities, interests and preferences.”⁴⁷

Over the past years the interest in the discussion about the Holocaust entry on Wikipedia has, however, diminished steadily and considerably. An analysis of the traffic statistics on the discussion pages since 2007 shows a decline from 1,900 monthly visits on average in 2008 and 1,800 in 2009 to 871 visits in 2012 and 697 in 2013. There was little change in the figures in 2014, but as the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in January 2015 drew near, discussion of the article increased again to reach over 1,340 entries in January of this year.⁴⁸ The overall waning interest on the other hand could mean that users and special interest groups have moved on to other discussion platforms, and there is some indication that especially the “brown swamp” (“brauner Sumpf” – in German the designation of groups or ideas with fascist or far-right tendencies) has made inroads into other social networks. An analysis of the German Jugendschutz.net shows that in 2012 right-wing extremist and neo-Nazi websites not only had increased in numbers⁴⁹ but had also become more visible on Web 2.0-platforms: More than 50 percent of the pages could be found either on Facebook or on YouTube. Also, extreme right-wing groups in Europe are transforming their image: They now are mainly young; stylish multimedia-blogs ensure brand-recognition via innocuous symbols such as flames, feathers, paintbrushes or the Greek lambda, and there are “Identity Movements” or “Generation of National Identity” blogs. These sites aim at a young audience and they are basically anti-democratic. They see themselves as members of non-parliamentary resistance and are genuinely against multiculturalism, being fanatically committed to their native country, to tradition and anarchic freedom. In many European countries, and this is especially true for Germany and Austria, these developments take place mainly on the Internet: Social media and social networks are used to promote right-wing messages, sell stickers, t-shirts and flags with the black lambda on yellow ground. The followers of these beliefs can often be found on Facebook and its Russian equivalent, VK (VKontakte).⁵⁰

Facebook and the Holocaust

For both Facebook and VK, anti-Semitism, racism, right-wing activism and holocaust denial are a huge problem. Even before Wiki-Leaks and Edward Snowden, Facebook was caught in the crossfire of critics because of its misuse of user data. Since Facebook changed from a student to a public network in 2006 the charges have increased, but for a long time the website successfully reverted to upholding its original terms of service, making it vulnerable to use by extreme right-wing groups and other extremists. In 2009 the German blogger Ianu created a list of 200 Facebook groups and fan pages with extreme right-wing content. Since then a lot has changed, but radical right-wing propaganda, anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial are still present on Facebook. These site contributions usually attempt to hide their racist and denialist tendencies. They propagate conspiracy theories and use multimedia as well as guerilla marketing and (National Socialist) Black Metal music to disseminate their messages.⁵¹

Repeatedly, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the Anti-Defamation League and a number of other international organizations have appealed to Facebook to remove offensive profiles and pages, such as the page “Holohoax” and “Based on the facts ... there was no Holocaust” or “I deny the Holocaust” and especially the page “Kill a Jew Day” (begun on 9 July 2010).⁵² After a storm of criticism on the Internet, media reports and open letters, Facebook blocked two sites (“Holohoax” and “Based on the facts ... there was no Holocaust”) that had been provoking violence and using “hate speeches” in 2009. Still, others remained – and keep resurfacing – online. Facebook defended its decision by appealing to the idea of freedom of speech and to its terms of service, where “hate speech” is actually prohibited. Denying the Holocaust, although historically incorrect and detestable, is, however, under these rules still not a reason for exclusion or deletion.⁵³

Facebook’s position provoked numerous private, public and institutional reactions on- and offline. Ironically, many Facebook groups called for activism against Facebook as well as against denier pages and profiles. Also, for example, German Telecom withdrew from advertising on the social network because Telecom ads had appeared on denier and neo-Nazi profiles. With these interventions remarkable individual success could be achieved: In addition to the above mentioned sites gradually other profiles were deleted and groups banned (eg. “Holocaust : A Series of Lies”; “I deny the Holocaust”). It has become everyday practice for Facebook users to denounce extremist profiles and in many cases these sites are being deleted or made invisible.⁵⁴

These initiatives, along with consistent commitment by museums and memorials, as well as the report of the Jugendschutz.net have been quite successful. Since October 2012 the search results for Holocaust-related profiles on Facebook has changed considerably: While in 2012 three denier sites were found amongst the top 30 hits and only 12 belonged to museums, memorials and educational initiatives (the other 15 belonging to music groups), within half a year these results had changed. In July 2013 the search request resulted in only six music groups and not a single denier site among the top 30. This ratio has remained almost stable until March 2014, except for the visible advance of museums, memorials and educational initiatives as well as the promotion of books, movies and TV-series which now amount to 23 hits among the top 30, with only six music groups and one pro-Israeli association left on the list.⁵⁵ Jugendschutz.net closely evaluated this progress and in 2013 announced that almost 75 percent of the indicated profiles were actually being deleted.⁵⁶

Despite these numerous challenges the Holocaust discourse faces when confronted with social networks, all influential museums, memorials and institutions have their own Facebook sites: The Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and

the Wiener Library in London have web profiles since 2008. In 2009 the Imperial War Museum London, the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance installed institutional sites. The Jewish Museum Berlin and the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, as well as the Museum of Tolerance in New York, followed in 2010. The entries made by these institutions are usually a balanced mix of announcements for upcoming events and so-called “emotional” information consisting of multimedia insights into the institutions’ daily routines.⁵⁷

In addition to the extreme right-wing profiles and the official pages of institutions several projects have emerged in recent years, which, due to their artistic and educational orientation, have had a considerable impact on how we deal with the Holocaust and its Internet-related sites today.

One of the early examples of Facebook-profiles is indeed still one of the most prominent: In the fall of 1942 Henio Zytomirski, a Polish boy from Lublin, was murdered at the age of nine in Majdanek concentration camp. Henio is the central figure in the permanent exhibition “The Primer. Children in Majdanek Camp” of the cultural center Brama Grodzka – Teatr NN (Grodzka Gate) in the State Museum of Majdanek. On August 18, 2009 Piotr Brozek “brought the boy to life” on Facebook. Brozek, then an employee of Brama Grodzka, created a Facebook profile with Henio’s biographical data and 34 family photos which Henio’s cousin Neta Avidar had donated to the cultural center. As a profile image he used a picture of the boy at the age of seven, smiling on the steps in front of a building. Broszek and Avidar then made little entries, either using sentences from family-postcards and letters or by inventing lines they thought a child at that age might have said.

The profile was a success. By the summer of 2010 Henio had reached a peak number of 5,000 friends; some entries were even translated into German, Hebrew and English. However, Brozek had not intended the site to be a long-term project and he deleted the profile in 2010. The wordless disappearance of Henio from Facebook was supposed to point to the wordless disappearance of Henio and thousands of others in real life.⁵⁸ Yet, despite the deletion of the page, Henio Zytomirsky re-appeared on a fan page⁵⁹ that had been created in the spring of 2010 and that showed copies of the original photos. The new profile, though, soon encountered problems associated with social networks such as Facebook: Again and again anti-Semitic and racist remarks had to be removed and users were reported because of “hate talk”. In addition, after a while the heated debates ebbed away and the operators of the profile started neglecting it. This led to all sorts of irrelevant entries such as ads for online money lending, offers to buy drugs and invitations to shooter-games in December 2011.⁶⁰ Since then the irrelevant entries have been deleted. The reduced fan page has remained online as a static profile without changes since December 17, 2011, although it has a slowly growing number of 7,400 “likes”.

Screenshot of Henio Zytomirski's fan page in December 2011, archived by author.

Brozek's project about Henio ultimately contributed to a change on how we use Facebook today. Until 2010 only living people were supposed to create profiles on the social network, since then Facebook has also turned into a site supporting the publication of biographies of deceased individuals. In Belgium, for example, an association of veterans – citing Henio's Facebook entry – announced its intention to create Facebook profiles for all 25,360 Allied soldiers buried in Belgian cemeteries. As of today there are about 110 of these profiles, which have all been well historicized and documented with material from the veterans' and their relatives' archives.⁶¹ The Musée de la Grande Guerre du Pays de Meaux in Paris also used Facebook in a similar setting to promote its World War I initiatives: The profile of Léon Vivien (1885–1915), a soldier who died during the war and “posted” his diary entries on Facebook from 2013 to March 2014 received 65,000 “likes”.⁶² This project also served to trigger a broad institutional debate on how to use social networks for the history and remembrance of the Holocaust – with results such as the “Holocaust Collection@footnote.com” (now fold3.com).⁶³

Without reference to living individuals another project appeared on Facebook on March 23, 2010. With the appeal “Let's reach to 6 million Jews all over the world!” anonymous users started collecting “likes” without actually making any entries on the Facebook wall and with only a caricature carrying an Israeli flag as a profile image. The page has had 212 “likes” for years now without ever having been changed.⁶⁴ Shortly afterwards, another profile was created as a joint project of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the US-Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC. On April 7, 2010 “6 Million for 6 Million” started collecting “likes”. The first entry promoted an initiative that recommended wearing a yellow star for Holocaust Remembrance Day on 12 April 2010, which sparked some lively discussions. After that many posts urged the site's users to share the link and to invite people to “like” the page. After only 9 days the profile had 7,500 “likes”, and at the end of the same month over 11,000. Then, however, the popularity of the site faded, reaching 11,423 “likes” in October 2012 and even losing some, so that now it shows 10,550 “thumbs-up”.⁶⁵

Screenshots of the two “6 Million” projects archived by author.

Almost simultaneously, on April 13, 2010, Yad Vashem created the community profile “6,000,000 Jews were murdered during the Holocaust by the Nazis – let’s reach to 6 million people who remember them”. It was intended as a “Memorial page dedicated to the memory of the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis and all other victims murdered by them.” This Facebook wall is covered with photos and photo-albums of the Holocaust. In the beginning the number of “likes” increased only slowly. However, by the end of May 2010, after intensive campaigning, it reached 80,000 “thumbs-up”. There is a long break on the site between August 27, 2010 and April 17, 2012, when no entries were made. Although the appeals for support of the site and for link-sharing have not ceased entirely, they have become considerably fewer since the resumption of the profile in 2012. In March 2014 the site had gathered over 186,000 “likes”.⁶⁶

Screenshot of the most successful of the “6 Million” projects, launched by Yad Vashem in 2010, archived by author.

The “collection-of-likes” project has also had its imitators. One of these referred to it even in its name, the German “Na wenn das mal Hitler wüsste. Ziel 1.000.000 like – Bitte hilf mit ;)” (“If Hitler knew this. Aim: 1 Million likes – Please help us;”) for example, was labelled “controversial humor” and therefore was allowed to remain on the social network. “Na wenn das mal Hitler wüsste” had almost 5,000 “likes” before it was replaced by a new site: In November 2013 it was changed into a page with jokes about teachers and students, fun-videos and clips, fast cars, nagging about women and parents. Apart from the word “Hitler” in the title (the second part

of the title was deleted) this site no longer had anything to do with racism or anti-Semitism. Despite this, it disappeared from Facebook at the end of 2014.⁶⁷

It would take an in-depth analysis of the “likes”-curve to find out what half-life the projects on Facebook have and how long it takes opponents to react and keep users on their side. The life cycles of the above-mentioned examples indicate that the attention of the audiences on Facebook cannot be guaranteed for a long time. Public interest is ephemeral, difficult to predict and unstable.

Conclusion

The above examples show that there is considerable public engagement with information that is available on the Internet about the history and the remembrance of the Holocaust. This form of public history is a challenge to both institutions and scholars or historians because it means time-consuming and especially serious engagement with the production of information, of historical knowledge disseminated through the web and the construction of “memory” as a global phenomenon. The Holocaust-discourse on the web reaches beyond Marianne Hirsch’s “postmemory”⁶⁸ and can be seen as an „engagement with a mediated representation“ in Alison Landsbergs „prosthetic memory“. ⁶⁹ Many of the online projects have aesthetics of reception that are exemplary for this discourse because they uncover the fluid relationships between the individual, cultural memory and media representation and because as such they illustrate today’s changing entangled interactions.

The engagement with the online-dimension of the Holocaust by now is a decisive aspect of the culture of remembrance. Everyone who approaches the Holocaust engages in this discourse where similar rules apply to different objects through all genres, media and arts. They are fundamental principles and postulates such as “authenticity, truthfulness, moral integrity, and accreditation through authorship” and they determine the “production, composition, reception, and assessment” ⁷⁰ of online content. Online-engagement, especially when it comes from individuals, may be short-lived but sometimes it has far-reaching consequences on how we mediate the history and remembrance of the Holocaust. The usage of social media as well as continuously emerging “new” technologies such as mobile apps, photo- and video-sharing platforms, Twitter and WhatsApp also lead to “new” and unprecedented forms of remembrance.⁷¹ Certainly, many of the mediations esp. in social networks expand the borders of what we are used to consider as the *state of the art*, but they do not break the established barriers. Henio’s Facebook site evokes performative and participatory empathy and identification. User’s comments both here and in the discussion-section on Wikipedia primarily reflect attempts of constructions of identity and categorizations of ourselves.⁷² Coupled with the “like”-statements these comments could also be read as political statements in the spirit of a multimedia, global “Never forget!”⁷³

Holocaust memorials and museums have by now realized the significance, the risk and the potential of this public history that in large parts can be ascribed to the simplicity and low-cost availability of the technology used. Institutions like the US-Holocaust-Memorial-Museum therefore engage in feeding several social media platforms with information that comes from its archives and collections: It enters data into its Facebook- and Google+-profile, offers twitter-feeds with up-to-date-events around the museum, carries on several Youtube-channels and offers link-lists on Delicious. It has various Pinterest-walls with hundreds of images, and with the rise of Instagram as a serious competition to Pinterest, created its own Instagram-wall in July 2014

even inviting the public to an “instameet” (an event where signed in visitors were encouraged to publish pictures from within the museum on Instagram) to the museum on February 1, 2015. Also, it narrates 20 stories on storify.com and offers its visitors a mobile App to facilitate the visit to the museum. Equally, Yad Vashem offensively addressed the changing information- and communication-habits with the latest relaunch of its homepage when it installed a “Social Network Wall”. Since then it has been reconstructing its own history on Facebook (the earliest Facebook-entry was created for August 1953) as well as operating a special site, the “IRemember”-wall, marking the International Holocaust Remembrance Day 2015 that randomly links user’s profiles to Holocaust victims from the Central Database of Shoah Victims’ Names. It is offering Youtube-channels in seven languages and presents tweets on “events” of the day 70 years ago. Its employees write lengthy blog posts and show thousands of images on the museums 62 Pinterest-walls. Its latest addition is an Instagram-project that started collecting pictures taken by Yad Vashem-staff since April 2015.

Despite all these efforts museums, memorials and the scholarly world always seem to lack behind public historians unbound by institutional restrictions and historiographic customs. While they still discuss the appropriateness of information and material to be shown on Facebook, Twitter and other social media, Holocaust-survivor Menachem (Elias) with the help of Ayana KimRon was using Facebook to search for his lost twin brother Jolly, tattooed A7734, (paradoxically) also using DNA-analysis and an ancestry-sharing platform. Although he did not find his brother before he died in February 2015, the attention the project received helped him to find relatives around the world and, for the first time since 1945, pictures from his family.

Notes

- ¹ Welzer and Lenz, "Opa in Europa", 7.
- ² Müller, *Memory & Power in Post-War Europe*, 13.
- ³ The term is widely used especially in US-American institutions for educational purposes. The most influential of these most likely was "The next Generation Initiative" of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC which was accompanying the celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the Museum, accessed March 13, 2013, <http://www.ushmm.org/support/nextgen/>. It addressed the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Holocaust victims and survivors as well as everybody else who was interested in learning about the Holocaust.
- ⁴ Martínez, *Der Holocaust und die Künste*, 9–11.
- ⁵ Sturken, "Memory, consumerism and media", 74–75.
- ⁶ van Dijck, *Mediated memories in the digital age*, Preface, Chapter "An Interdisciplinary Approach to Memory".
- ⁷ Kazmierczak, *Auschwitz w Internecie*. I would like to thank Marek Kazmierczak for kindly sending me an extensive English abstract of his book.
- ⁸ To name only a few: Erll and Rigney, *Mediation, remediation*; Kaplan, *Landscapes of Holocaust postmemory*; Neiger et al., *On media memory*; Frosh and Pinchevski, *Media witnessing*; Korte and Paletschek, *History goes pop*; Gebert, *Carina unvergessen*; Grabbe and Schindler, *The merits of memory*; Gudehus et al, *Gedächtnis und Erinnerung*; Horstkemper and Sorbello Staub, "Virtuelle Erinnerungskultur", 106–108; Greengrass and Hughes, *The virtual representation of the past*; Berressem, "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale", 341–368.
- ⁹ van Dijck, *Mediated memories in the digital age*; van Dijck, *The culture of connectivity*.
- ¹⁰ Keitz and Weber, *Mediale Transformationen des Holocausts*.
- ¹¹ Landsberg, *Prosthetic memory*; Landsberg, "Memory, Empathy, and the Politics of Identification", 221–229.
- ¹² Hirsch, "The Generation Postmemory", 104–128; Hirsch and Spitzer, "Incongruous Images", 9–25.
- ¹³ Sturken, "Memory, consumerism and media", 73–78.
- ¹⁴ Foxman and Wolf, *Viral hate*.
- ¹⁵ Jugendschutz.net, „Neonazis im Social Web: zunehmend aggressiv und perfide“, last modified July 9, 2013, <http://www.hass-im-netz.info/service/presse/presseinformation.html>.
- ¹⁶ Meixner and Pfanzer, „Oral History in den Geschichtswissenschaften“, 77–95.
- ¹⁷ Knowles et al., *Geographies of the holocaust*.
- ¹⁸ Garde-Hansen, *Media and memory*, 41–45.
- ¹⁹ Erll, "Medium des kollektiven Gedächtnisses", 14–15, 36–38.
- ²⁰ Van House and Churchill, "Technologies of memory", 296.
- ²¹ van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*, vii.
- ²² Assmann, „Zur Mediengeschichte des kulturellen Gedächtnisses“, 57.
- ²³ Van House and Churchill, "Technologies of memory", 304.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 296.
- ²⁵ Trend analysis for search interest "holocaust", carried out May 28, 2015, <http://www.google.com/trends>.
- ²⁶ Trend-analysis for search interest "holocaust", Germany, carried out May 28, 2015, <http://www.google.com/trends>.
- ²⁷ Michel et al, "Quantitative Analysis of Culture".
- ²⁸ Analysis carried out May 28, 2015, <http://books.google.com/ngrams>.
- ²⁹ Tarantola, "Google Changes the Way Its Search Engine Works".
- ³⁰ Figures from the author's own archive. *Startpage* proudly propagates its reduction efforts. Here the hits are as follows: The decrease in search results between 2012 and 2015 when combining "holocaust" with "images" was from over 1 million in 2012 to 56,000 hits in March 2014 and a further reduction to 45.500 in May 2015. The combination of "holocaust" with "video" returned a decrease from 140,000 in 2012 to 120,000 in 2013 and a cut to 1,279 in May 2015. In *ixquick* the results on May 28, 2015 are: 10 million Web-pages, 45.100 images, 1279 videos.
- ³¹ Alexa analytics for "holocaust", carried out March 26, 2014, <http://www.alexa.com>.
- ³² LePage, "The Evolution of Social Media 2008–2013".
- ³³ Trend analysis for search interest "holocaust" combined with "picture", "video", "blog" and "forum", carried out May 28, 2015, <http://www.google.com/trends>.
- ³⁴ Trend analysis of search interest for "holocaust", comparing "facebook", "youtube", "myspace", "instagram" and "wikipedia", carried out May 28, 2015, <http://www.google.com/trends>.

- ³⁵ Information for "The Holocaust", accessed March 27, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Holocaust&action=info.
- ³⁶ Talk: The Holocaust, accessed March 27, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:The_Holocaust.
- ³⁷ Wikimedia Tool Labs (eg.), The Holocaust - Article revision statistics - X!'s tools, carried out March 27, 2014, <http://tools.wmflabs.org/xtools/>.
- ³⁸ Author's calculations from Domas Mituzas, Wikipedia article traffic statistics, carried out May 28, 2015, <http://stats.grok.se/en>.
- ³⁹ Yasserli et al, "The most controversial topics in Wikipedia", Chapter 3.1 Overlapping lists and the patterns.
- ⁴⁰ Qualitative analysis of the top 60 talks with more than 20 replies of TALK: The Holocaust/Archive index, generated March 13, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:The_Holocaust.
- ⁴¹ Talk: The Holocaust, The role of Mohammad Amin al-Husayni - REQUEST TO DELETE, entry created February 27, 2010, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:The_Holocaust/Archive_24.
- ⁴² Lemma The Holocaust, Chapter "Climax", accessed March 27, 2014, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>.
- ⁴³ Talk: The Holocaust, accessed March 27, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:The_Holocaust.
- ⁴⁴ User SlimVergin, NPOV again, entry created November 19, 2007, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:The_Holocaust/Archive_17.
- ⁴⁵ User Midnightblueowl, GA review, entry created February 2, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:The_Holocaust/Archive_28.
- ⁴⁶ Dvorak, "Wikipedia's Edit Wars".
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., Abstract.
- ⁴⁸ Wikipedia article traffic statistics for Talk: The Holocaust, carried out May 28, 2015, http://stats.grok.se/en/201312/Talk:The_Holocaust.
- ⁴⁹ In 2012 Jugendschutz.net monitored 7,000 websites as compared to 5,400 in 2011 – an increase by a third.
- ⁵⁰ Jugendschutz.net ed., Rechtsextremismus online beobachten und nachhaltig bekämpfen, Mainz 2013, <http://hass-im-netz.info/fileadmin/dateien/pk2013/bericht2012.pdf>.
- ⁵¹ Pfanzelter, „Inszenierung – Vernetzung – Performanz“, 63–83.
- ⁵² Wolf, „Holocaust Denial and Freedom of Speech“. Cf. also Simon Wiesenthal Center, "Witness to the Truth".
- ⁵³ Pfanzelter, „Inszenierung – Vernetzung – Performanz“, 63–83.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 65–68.
- ⁵⁵ Facebook search results for query "holocaust" carried out October 2012, July 2013, March 2014.
- ⁵⁶ Jugendschutz.net, *Rechtsextremismus online*.
- ⁵⁷ Pfanzelter, „Inszenierung – Vernetzung – Performanz“, 64–80.
- ⁵⁸ Janzen, „Erinnerung 2.0.“.
- ⁵⁹ "Henio Zytomirski Page – No limited Profile", compiled March 27, 2010, <https://www.facebook.com/zytomirski?fref=ts>.
- ⁶⁰ Archived Facebook profiles of Henio Zytomirski by author.
- ⁶¹ The Belgian National Institute for Veterans and Victims of War, ed., "New project: Allied WWII soldiers remembered on Facebook", accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.warveterans.be/generalites>.
- ⁶² "Facebook-Profil Léon Vivien", updated November 28, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/leon1914>.
- ⁶³ In August 2011 the domain name changed from <http://www.footnote.com> to <http://www.fold3.com>. The new site is a cooperative work with Ancestry.com and has a specific focus on military history. The Holocaust-Collection now can be found at The National Archives and US Holocaust Memorial Museum eds., "The Holocaust Collection", <http://go.fold3.com/holocaust> and its 600 profiles at: The National Archives and US Holocaust Memorial Museum eds., Stories from the Holocaust, http://go.fold3.com/holocaust_stories, both accessed May 27, 2015.
- ⁶⁴ Facebook profile "Let's reach to 6 million Jews all over the world!", entry created March 23 2010, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Lets-reach-to-6-million-Jews-all-over-the-world>.
- ⁶⁵ US-Holocaust Memorial Museum and Yad Vashem eds., 6 Million for 6 Million, accessed May 27, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/6-Million-for-6-Million>.
- ⁶⁶ Community profile by Yad Vashem ed., "6,000,000 Jews were murdered during the Holocaust by the Nazis – let's reach to 6 million people who remember them", entry created 13 April 2010, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/6000000-Jews-were-murdered-during-the-Holocaust-by-the-Nazis-lets-reach-to-6-million-people-who-remember-them>.
- ⁶⁷ "Na wenn das mal Hitler wüsste", entry created November 13, 2013 <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Umtrittener-Humor-Na-wenn-das-mal-der-Hitler-w%C3%BCsste>.

- ⁶⁸ Hirsch, „The Generation Postmemory“, 106.
⁶⁹ Landsberg, „Memory, Empathy, and the Politics of Identification“, 222.
⁷⁰ Martínez, *Der Holocaust und die Künste*, 9–11.
⁷¹ Pfanzelter, „Inszenierung – Vernetzung – Performanz“, 63–83.
⁷² Van House, „Feminist HCI meets facebook“, 422–429.
⁷³ nadine, „Being Friends with Henio Zytomirski“.

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